



**INSIDE PROXIMITY'S MIND**

**Laird Wilcox: Observer of the Far Out**

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*Free Minds and Free Markets*

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## **Pop Music, Blue Jeans, & Ovaltine**

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in Thailand  
(Are You Listening,  
Cory Aquino?)**

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Buckley's Fatal Obsession**

**Rugged Westerners  
Slurp at the Trough**



## PROPAGANDA

### **Meet Laird Wilcox**

Part-time Commie, part-time Klansman, full-time observer of the far-out

ANDY CLINE | FROM THE JULY 1986 ISSUE

Members of the Ku Klux Klan think Laird Wilcox is a Commie stooge. The Communists think he's a fascist lackey. But Laird Wilcox considers himself anti-ideological, a self-styled rational man who maintains that ideologies are a substitute for critical thinking.

Wilcox thinks about radicals, extremists, and ideologues of all stripes. Since age 16, he's spent his intellectual energies trying to figure out why members of extremist groups think what they think. Over the years he has subscribed to their journals, attended their meetings, marched in their demonstrations, and even written their propaganda.

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That commitment produced the Wilcox Collection of Contemporary Political Movements in the Kenneth Spencer Research Library at the University of Kansas. It is one of the largest collections of extremist literature, brochures, books, correspondence, and speeches in the world.

Wilcox, 43, now runs an editorial research business from his Olathe, Kansas, home and handles requests for publications about extremist groups from such clients as the *New York Times* and CBS. He also publishes two annuals: *Guide to the American Right* and *Guide to the American Left*. He tops that off with the *Wilcox Report* newsletter. He also has to make a living, which he does as a carpenter, and he's an active member of the union local.

The Wilcox Collection and Wilcox's own escapades on both sides of the right-left axis grew from an intellectually turbulent childhood. "I grew up in a family with a fair amount of intellectual intensity," he says. Various family members represented two political extremes. Political arguments were an everyday part of family life.

"I became sensitized to political and ideological issues when I was very young," Wilcox recalls. "I tried to understand how it was people could get so excited about these things, how they could become so upset about things that to me were mere abstractions. The idea that these were important matters was impressed on me at an early age."

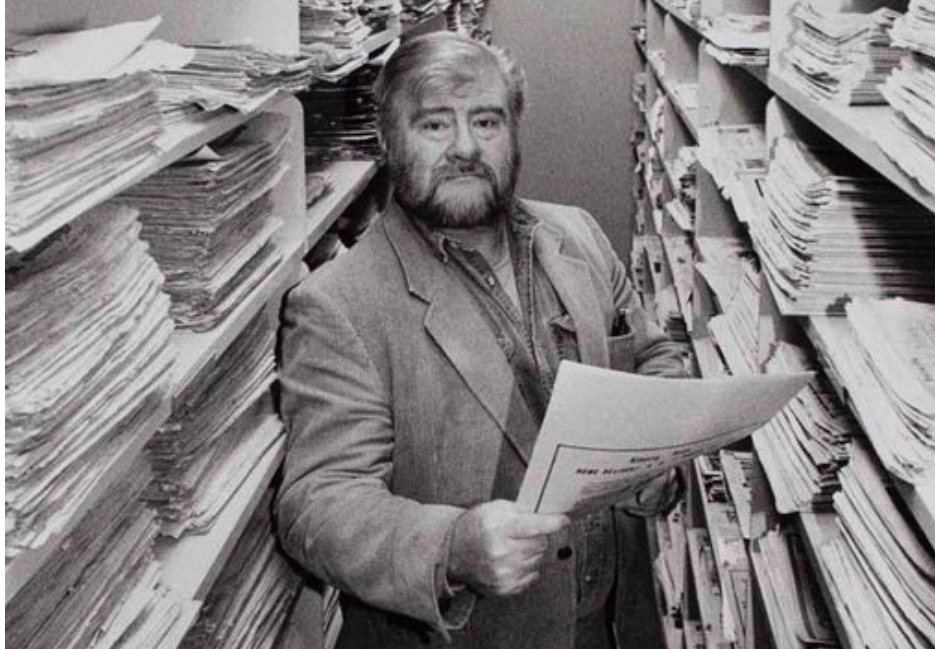
During college, Wilcox joined the radical left, a political tradition he inherited from his father. He founded the Student Peace Union and the *Kansas Free Press* at the University of Kansas. He was active in Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the civil-rights movement. Then something happened.

What started out as a noble cause turned ugly. "When it came to the left," he now says of that time, "I'd never seen such hate in my life." He quit the movement as he saw it sliding into "mindless nihilism, self-destructiveness, and craziness."

In 1965, before leaving the university and joining forces with the right to complete his intellectual journey, he sold his collection of political literature to the university for \$1,000, thus beginning the Wilcox Collection.

For a time he waltzed as an observer through such organizations as the Ku Klux Klan, the John Birch Society, and some fundamentalist Christian groups. He participated to the fullest and built his collection of literature of the right.

Then Wilcox began to straddle the line. One week he could be seen at a Socialist Workers Party meeting and the next marching with the Nazis. He became plugged in at the highest levels.



"I can talk anyone's bullshit," Wilcox declares. This apparently flip attitude cannot mask his devotion to the extremist mind he's come to know. From close contact with these groups, from befriending their leaders and working for their causes, he's formed a psychology of extremism that may one day take book form.

His Jekyll and Hyde abilities have sometimes got him into trouble. "At times I've forgotten where I was," he says—like the time he accidentally greeted a John Birch Society member at a JBS function as "comrade."

The KKK once issued a "wanted" poster for Wilcox after a scuffle in Chicago. Wilcox was driving through the city when he spotted a KKK rally and decided to stop for a look. First he spoke with a group of Klansmen, fitting in perfectly. Then he ambled over to a black police officer and struck up an equally friendly conversation—which Klan security men didn't find amusing. A scuffle ensued. Wilcox slugged a Klansman before police broke it up. The Klan labeled him a "cointelpro"—someone who spies for the government. The poster calls for Klansmen spotting Wilcox at any Klan function to alert the Klan security forces.

Wilcox is fond of pointing out the differences between extremists of the right and left. These days he's hammering hard on the left, because he sees greater oppression of rightist groups by the left and the government.

He's also fond of supporting the forces of reason. Last year, an anti-abortion advertisement by Feminists for Life of America in the populist monthly *The Progressive* drew sharp criticism from the left. It even lost the magazine some subscriptions. Wilcox promptly sent in his subscription

money with a note saying that "there's a whole lot in *The Progressive* that is contrary to my ideological biases and I think it's just fine. I believe in tolerance and open-mindedness, too." He concluded his note by pointing out that such close-mindedness has popularly been thought to exist only on the right.

Political violence is another area of vast right-left differences, Wilcox observes. "When one compares the incidence of violence emanating from right-wing groups with the violence from the left over the the past 20 years," he notes, "it becomes obvious that violence is hardly a right-wing monopoly." He points out that the left traditionally likes acts of mass violence, whereas the right prefers one-on-one acts.

Just about every week, and often several times a week, radio stations from around the country ask Wilcox to answer questions from the stations' listeners by telephone hookup. Sitting at his cluttered desk shuffling papers, Wilcox speaks to the questions of callers. Most want to know what this or that particular group is up to. These days, callers want to know about the radical anti-tax Posse Comitatus or The Order, a racist group. A few still ask about the left, but not many. The left isn't making headlines now.

But no matter what the question, Wilcox likes to talk about the current state of our civil liberties and the mind of political ideologues. Wilcox cites many reasons why people join extremist groups, but a common thread is that their decisions are often not rational. The reasons can include envy, hatred, paranoia, and feelings of moral superiority. "Most of them pick up ideologies the way a dog picks up fleas," he says. But perhaps the most interesting reason he's found is "propaganda addiction"—that is, for some people the propaganda of extremism is an intoxicating liquor.

To test his theory of propaganda addiction—that the ideology itself, right or left, makes little difference to the addict—Wilcox experimented on a handful of Socialist Workers Party members. He invited them to listen to a dynamic speaker of the Nazi Party. Although all listened in horror to views so opposed to their own, two still seemed caught up in the fervor of the words. A few years later, those two, a husband and wife, became members of the Nazi Party. Wilcox credits their exposure to a dynamic speaker as the beginning of the change and proof of propaganda addiction.

Wilcox also cites one last explanation of people's political extremism: "There are some things you just can't believe without being crazy." Yet crazed or no, extremist groups, in the way they are treated, are the measure of freedom within a society, Wilcox believes. "Regardless of what one thinks of this radical movement or that—right or left—we must not allow ourselves to be stampeded into repression," he says. "Political dissidents of all kinds are human beings, and in protecting their rights we're only protecting our own."

Today's targets of repression, Wilcox maintains, are the rightist groups. "I see developing a McCarthyism against the radical right," he says, citing government and special-interest campaigns against such groups. "If a member of the Posse Comitatus shoots a cop, you arrest the bastard. You don't harass every member of the entire organization." Wilcox also believes that the danger from these farm-belt radical groups is vastly overblown.

The government is also keeping a close eye on anti-Zionist groups, Wilcox maintains. "Any group that is critical of Israel is in for trouble," he says.

Wilcox even sees government censorship on the horizon, possibly beginning with pornography bans and leading to anti-hate legislation (laws forbidding literature and speech that is viewed as fomenting hatred toward a group of people—in Canada, for instance, federal law forbids the dissemination of materials that question the existence of the Holocaust). Too bad, says Wilcox. He credits extremist groups with sometimes dealing with important issues and scouting the leading edge of social change. (Recall that American revolutionaries such as Jefferson, Paine, and Franklin, as radical anti-monarchists, were considered political extremists of their day.)

Wilcox's uneasiness about the threat to freedom of speech has even driven him back into the ranks of the American Civil Liberties Union, an organization he's been in and out of for 25 years. "It's the only organization with the resources to effectively defend free speech," he argues. But it's also turning into the "legal arm for leftist special-interest groups," he admits.

Wilcox calls himself a libertarian, but he has a few disagreements with the Libertarian Party line ("I'm more hawkish," he says, as an example). "Political freedom is incredibly necessary," he declares. Indeed, Wilcox knows quite a bit about government abuse. His own FBI file is a thick one. It began growing after his involvement in an early '60s rally of Fair Play for Cuba, a pro-Castro group.

For several years, Wilcox has worked with limited success to have his file released to him. He reproduced a copy of what he was able to obtain and passes it out to friends as an amusement. It's hard to find anything in it that anyone would care to keep classified. Yet much of the total file still is.

The FBI is also interested in Wilcox's collection and the personal information he's gathered through the years. He gets a call from the agency now and then asking about different groups. Wilcox isn't much help. Although he was once a deputy sheriff in a Kansas county, he no longer wants to be involved in enforcement or surveillance.

The FBI buys Wilcox's publications and calls him for help, but it still keeps tabs on him. His name has appeared on the mailing lists of countless far-out groups, including a nonexistent one supposedly headed by John Hinckley, President Reagan's failed assassin. This led to a visit by the Secret Service in 1981. The government can't seem to sort out whether Wilcox is a danger to the republic or what. "They just don't get it," he says.

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